

Ruinous Health

When an apple tree has been neglected for some year, disease and undirected growth combine to spoil its fruit. Only worms eat the small, sour apples; people will never touch them. Spraying one spring will keep the insects away, but we will need more than spray to bring the old tree back: the pruning saw must restructure the tree's growth before it will be healthy again.

A tree's natural, healthy growth works against its future health. Vigorous new limbs, growing without our careful attention, keep sunlight and air from reaching the mature limbs. Untended branches rub against each other, breaking the bark, leaving an open sore by which disease may enter the tree's trunk. New shoots start up at the base of the old tree, draining energy from the soil. Eventually, as the new shoots grow into small trees, they extend leaves that rob the old tree of sunlight. Sun makes sugar. When untrimmed branches keep sun from blossom and apple, the result is small apples that never sweeten.

Burgeoning growth is its own undoing. The remedy is the saw, for amputation makes the remaining limbs stronger—open to necessary sunlight, taking necessary energy from soil.

Bone's Orchard

The orchard faced north on a gentle slope above the farmhouse and the barn. The trees were evenly spaced, and from the hills across the valley the orchard looked like the squares of a quilt. In spring the massive blossoms turned the slope a uniform white. All summer the green leaves of the mature trees blended into the grass of the hill, and the orchard seemed to retreat into a greened shade. In autumn, as one approached the orchard, one became aware of a rich harvest of redness weighing down the old boughs. For a few weeks ladders and apple-pickers poked among the trees, until the fruit was picked clean, packed into crates for shipment to stores, or squeezed into gallons of fresh, tangy cider. In winter the black leafless branches looked starved and skinny against the snow.

A Choice for the Home Gardener

Old-fashioned apple trees grow twenty-five high and nearly as wide. One tree can displace a large portion of a suburban or city garden. But botanists have solved the space problem by grafting standard-variety branches onto the roots of dwarf trees that grow from nine to fifteen feet high.

Saving space is not the only convenience of the smaller trees. Gardeners can put away their ladders; they can prune, spray, and harvest dwarfs and semidwarf apple trees while standing on the ground. Also, these trees are quicker to mature, yielding fruit several years before their standard-sized progenitors.

On the other hand, if you're looking for lots of apples, the standard varieties might be the best. Remember that you need good storage facilities, or equipment for making cider, or a market for your produce. But if you simply wish to provide your family with home-grown apples in modest quantities, the smaller trees may serve your purposes better, both for health and for beauty, for pink and white blossoms in the spring for fresh fruit in the fall.

The Growth of Orchards

In the narrow valleys of New England, intensive fruit growth has replaced the general subsistence farm on which a family kept cows, sheep, chickens, and pigs while growing a large vegetable garden. Some farmers now plant a few intensively fertilized acres of strawberries or blueberries, often marketed to customers willing to do their own picking. But such enterprises require nearby cities for their customers. On the sloping hills of northern New England and western Massachusetts, unable to accommodate the farm machinery that makes large herds of milk cattle economical, the family –sized apple orchard provides a common crop.

At Booth's Orchard outside Montague, Massachusetts, the family of Richard Booth tends eight hundred trees including twenty-five varieties from the old Macintosh to the new Empire. The family of five runs its thirty acres as a vertical conglomerate, setting out new trees and cutting down old ones that have slowed their production, trimming and fertilizing, picking the crop with the assistance of neighbors. Then they sell bushels and pecks of apples, and gallons of apple cider in front of their house from a roadside stand.

Trouble in the Orchard

When Richard Booth woke on an October night two years ago, he felt that something was wrong without knowing why he felt as he did. He pulled on a coat over his nightshirt; he pulled long boots lined with felt over his bare feet. Then he set out the back door into his orchard where he had spent a long day with his neighbors picking trees of their ripe apples. At first he saw nothing out of order. Then he made a series of observations in quick succession. First, there was a large bird's nest in an old tree where there had been no bird's nest earlier that afternoon. Second, there was a dog underneath the tree, which made Booth remember that it was a howling sound which had woken him up.

But third, he knew that the bird's nest was not a bird's nest, and the dog was not a dog.

Apples and Evil

The most useful fruits, apples first discovered their utility in the definition of sin. It was sin, or evil, for man and woman to eat the fruit that God forbade them to eat, the tree that bore the knowledge of good and evil. It seems that the writers of the Old Testament, or at least the authors of Genesis, believed that there is no evil without consciousness of evil. Although it would be illogical therefore to equate consciousness with evil, we can at least acknowledge that after we have eaten the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, true innocence is no longer possible. Once that consciousness exists, we are moral beings, prone to the evil of sin that we are born to, and subject to the moral universe. Evil is disobedience, and it is also a result of disobedience, but if there were no evil there could be no possibility of good. From early in the history of the Christian church, thinkers have recognized this paradox. If Adam and Eve had not disobeyed God, if man had not fallen, Jesus would have had nothing and no one to redeem. This is the paradox of the fortunate fall, the happy sin, by which traditional Christians find themselves praising the wicked eating of an apple in paradise.

Eating Apples and Cooking Apples

Apples generally fall into one of two categories—those good for eating and those good for cooking. What makes a good eating apple? For one thing, the skin should be pleasant to taste—not too thick or waxy and never bitter. The pulp should be pleasantly sweet without added sugar, and the texture should be crisp and moist, not mealy or dry. A perfectly fresh Macintosh is the best eating apple there is—soon after picking. After a couple days, the skin loses its tender crispness and the pulp becomes mushy. The Macintosh is a poor keeper, as the best eating apples tend to be.

Because the skin of a cooking apple is usually removed in making apple pastries and sauces, a tough skin is no impediment. The thick and waxy skin of the Rome Beauty covers firm flesh, perhaps a little drier than the Macintosh, so that the Rome Beauty will never turn to mush when it's cooked. In general, the drier, firmer-fleshed apples are good keepers that hold their shape in pies and pastries.

Finally, the qualities that make a good eating or cooking apple are a subjective matter.

Planting an Apple Tree

The first step is to choose the appropriate site. Apple trees flourish best on rolling land; planting on the sides or tops of hills allows cold air to drain away during potentially damaging frosty spring nights. Hilly terrain also provides good water drainage; apples cannot abide wet feet.

Once the site is chosen, the next step is soil preparation. Where topsoil is shallow the subsoil should be enriched with organic matter, with compost. In sandy soils, we should mix compost with peat.

Plant the young tree no deeper than it grew at the nursery, spreading the roots well in the hole. Put the topsoil back first, and stamp it firmly with your foot. Water well, allowing the water to drain completely into the soil. Then finish filling the hole. If you dug up sod to plant the tree, replace the sod face down, and mulch with three or four inches of hay, straw, or leaf mold. Give the tree another good soak, and don't allow the soil to dry for at least ten days.

Slicing Apples

We classify apples by the names we give them, by calling them Macintosh, Baldwin, Cortland, Fuji, and Delicious. The names taste good, but only if you can attach a memory to them. Each of these fruits, if we dissect it, is composed after all of the same components—pith or meat, skin, core, and seeds. We tell them apart, for pleasure and nutrition, by taste, smell, and characteristics that suggest their use. But there is more than one way to slice an apple: A Macintosh is smaller than many other apples, sweeter, and does not keep so well. It is best to consume it within thirty-six hours of picking. On the other hand, the Cortland...